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**2001-2005 AREA PLAN**  
**NEEDS ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES**  
**California Department of Aging**

May 2000

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# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

### **Part I - Needs Assessment Process**

- A. General
- B. Area Plan Preparation
- C. Needs Assessment and Public Input

### **Part II – Methodology**

- A. Comments on Methods
- B. The Core Questions

### **Part III - Data Collection**

- A. Survey Methods
- B. Other Subjective Methods – Community Forums
- C. Objective Data

### **Part IV - Best Practices Recommendations**

- A. Mailed Surveys
- B. Survey Methods
- C. Utilization of Information and Assistance (I & A) System

### **Part V – Questionnaires**

- Survey of Adult and Aging Populations (Sample Core Questionnaire)
- Needs Assessment for Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities (Suggested Questions)

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Section 306(a)(1) of the Older Americans Act (OAA) requires the Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) to determine the extent of need for supportive services (including those services associated with Access, In-Home Services and Legal Assistance), nutrition services and for multipurpose senior centers when preparing area plans, and to evaluate the effectiveness of resources in meeting these local needs. The California Code of Regulations implementing the OAA (Title 22, Division 1.8), details the needs assessment process to be used and the resultant outcomes. The Older Californians Act (OCA), [Welfare & Institutions Code, Section 9400(d)] requires that each Area Agency assess the need for services and develop and implement a plan for delivery of those services based on those needs. This assessment of community needs becomes even more critical with the increase in AAA responsibilities brought about by the recent addition of the State-funded Community-Based Service Programs (CBSP).

The 2001-2005 Area Plan will also include both the Title VII Ombudsman Program and the Title V Senior Employment Program in the needs assessment process and will require, at a minimum, one goal and/or objective for each service that is funded with either federal OAA, Title V or State OCA dollars.

The goal of the upcoming 2001-2005 Area Plan is to provide readers with a more comprehensive picture of how services will address identified local need(s) and to demonstrate how these services are being integrated into the community service network. This is a broader focus than in previous area planning efforts. Thus, the needs assessment guidance will also have a broader application.

Needs assessments are the key to the entire planning and service delivery process. They pose the questions of "who, what, and why" around which services will be established. Past discussion on the development of a needs assessment strategy has taken place over the last two (2) planning cycles, with a focus on developing guidance for the uniform collection of core data. Maintaining this agreed-upon strategy will help support consistency in this assessment process.

This needs assessment guidance document capitalizes on the work previously done (see PM 96-22, issued September 1996) and includes information on required CBSPs with a discussion of methods for data collection.

## PART I - NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

### A. General

For the purpose of this guideline, a needs assessment is defined as a systematic process for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting *timely* information on *local* [with relevance to your specific Planning and Service Area (PSA)] service needs of the client population. This population includes not only seniors and those targeted senior groups such as individuals with the greatest economic and social needs, as well as those with severe disabilities; but, depending upon the programs, could also include functionally impaired adults as well.

The California Code of Regulations (Title 22, Article 3, §7300) outlines the purpose for conducting a needs assessment, which is to identify: A) target populations; B) the types and extent of existing and potential needs of older individuals in the PSA; and C) the services and resources existing within the PSA that are available for addressing those needs as well as any existing constraints. In addition, this section also lists the minimum contents of the needs assessment which includes: 1) an analysis of the Department of Finance Census Tables or data from the U.S. Census Bureau; 2) a review of data obtained from other social service agencies that provide services to older individuals; and 3) completion and analysis of a sample survey of older individuals. (Please refer to the above-mentioned regulations subsection for specific details).

The needs assessment process should be approached systematically. It is a planned and purposeful activity carried out step-by-step as a part of the overall planning process; a process which includes *program planning, implementation, and evaluation*. A needs assessment is key to the process as it provides a fundamental basis for the development of the agency's area plan.

The needs assessment should result in two principal products. The first is the identification of the types and extent of existing and potential needs of the client population within the community, and of the services or resources existing within that community which are available for addressing those needs. The second is an estimation of *unmet needs, under-utilized services, and barriers, which prevent access to available services*. These two products will provide AAA planners and decision-makers with a firm foundation for formulating policy and for developing the area plan. The definition of need as a gap between what currently exists and what is required will help in suggesting actions which can be taken to fill the gap, and the needs assessment will therefore suggest priorities for programs and services and where they should be targeted. On the basis of identified priorities, goals and related objectives can be developed to guide the planning effort to focus on a specific range or group of needs.

In order to maximize the credibility and utility of the results of a needs assessment, and to enhance its value to planners and decision-makers, the needs assessment process should be conducted in a systematic and comprehensive manner. The process should be open, and as inclusive as possible of input from all appropriate entities. It should involve persons representative of the community's full demographic profile. Finally, complete documentation of the process should be maintained by the AAAs.

There are minimum needs assessment requirements identified in regulations that must precede each four-year planning cycle. These requirements are referenced in various sections of this document. Some AAAs, for a variety of reasons such as rapidly changing demographics in their PSA, may find it necessary to go beyond the published minimum standards and to continue the needs assessment process on an on-going basis throughout the four-year cycle. In such cases, the AAA may want to create a separate needs assessment goal with associated objectives and incorporate this goal into their Area Plan. An example of this would be an AAA's desire to assess in more detail, the needs of multiple ethnic groups residing in the PSA over a three-year period. A plan for this activity would be captured in a goal statement with timelines and related measurable objectives. This approach will serve to provide the public with a more detailed description of the assessment process for that particular AAA.

The AAAs Advisory Council has a particularly important role to play in the needs assessment process. To be consistent with the function and composition as outlined in the Older Americans Act, the Advisory Council should be representative of the interests of all those in the PSA who are involved in programs for seniors. The Advisory Council should be involved as early as possible in the development of the area plan, including planning for the needs assessment, and should be encouraged to provide input into its purpose and design. This will help to ensure that the data collected are relevant for planning, and will assist in assuring that the objectives set for the needs assessment are achieved.

Area Agencies should combine assessment methods whenever possible to achieve the advantages of a convergent approach. A convergent approach to needs assessment assumes that planners should not rely on one type of measure or source of data as the basis for a planning decision. Many sources of data should be sought to promote higher levels of citizen participation, to guarantee more representative input into the planning process, and to maximize its validity. Methods used in a convergent approach to needs assessment may include, but need not be limited to the use of: census data; community surveys; client surveys; provider surveys; focus groups; service data; and public hearings.

The advantages of a convergent approach are:

- one set of data collected through one method may validate data collected through another method;
- the use of multiple methods will lead to the completion of a more comprehensive needs assessment and will help to avoid "blind spots";
- the use of multiple methods will lay the groundwork for further inquiry;
- the review and analysis of multiple methods over time will provide an indication of the stability or changing nature of needs; and
- use of less comprehensive and less costly methods in interim periods will be more cost effective for the AAAs.

## **B. Area Plan Preparation**

Because of the importance of the needs assessment process to the entire planning cycle, some specific expectations have been outlined for use in the development of an Area Agency's plan.

First, the findings resulting from the needs assessment activities should be used as a primary basis for the initial development of goals and objectives for the four-year area plan. New perspectives arising from subsequent needs assessment efforts should be reflected in plan updates. Findings should be based on documented analysis of the data collected and prioritized to establish the goals to be addressed in the area plan. As mentioned in the **Introduction and Background**, this area plan includes a requirement to identify, at a minimum, one goal and/or objective for each service that is funded with either federal OAA, Title V, or State OCA dollars.

Second, the California Code of Regulations (Title 22, Article 3, §7302) requires AAAs to include in their area plans a section on needs assessment which contains the following components:

- the identification of the needs assessment methods used in the process and the reason for their selection along with a brief summary of the documentation associated with the method(s) selected (minimum documentation is discussed in Part II A – see Page 7);
- a discussion of the findings of the needs assessment;
- characteristics of survey/public forum participants;
- a description of the sources of data used;
- a brief summary of the analysis of the data and the rationale used in prioritizing the areas to be addressed in the area plan;
- the identification in priority order of the areas of need resulting from the assessment process, including targeting plans; and
- a brief description of the role-played by the Advisory Council and other strategies to obtain public input in the needs assessment process.

Third, AAAs should maintain records pertaining to the methods and process of how the needs were arrived at (see Part II A – Pages 7 - 9).

## **C. Needs Assessment and Public Input**

Needs assessment is one of the areas in which public participation plays an important role and which can result in an assessment more accurately reflective of a community's needs. The Older Americans Act, since its inception, has emphasized the importance of public involvement and participation in planning for and delivery of services. The OCA also emphasizes the requirement to incorporate the OCA programs into the AAA's

planning process and to assess the need for the State-funded programs. As the ultimate beneficiaries of these services, the public's role is all the more critical in seeking to accurately identify and assess needs.

Area Agencies on Aging have implemented a number of successful approaches to increasing public participation. Among the most common strategies are:

1. Appointing citizens/older persons to the AAA's Governing Board and Advisory Council.
2. Using community outreach efforts in hiring and recruiting staff.
3. Involving volunteers at both the AAA and service provider levels.
4. Using customer satisfaction surveys and evaluations, both formal and informal.
5. Holding public hearings, meetings, discussion groups, forums, etc.
6. Involving community leaders, key informants, and staff of non-senior programs, etc.
7. Regularly and frequently reviewing program use and demand for services.

## **PART II - METHODOLOGY**

This section on methodologies is included in order to provide guidance on a few basic means available for data collection and to help with statewide consistency.

### **A. Comments on Methods**

#### **1. Gathering Data**

- a. Needs assessment data can be either objective or subjective. Objective data is "hard", factual, not subject to opinion, and is usually quantitative. (For example, the poverty rate is 28%; last month there were 83 calls to the elder abuse hot line.) Subjective data is based on people's opinion or beliefs. Most of the needs assessment data with which we are most familiar is of this type. (What do you feel is a problem to you/your customers?)

While many are impressed with "hard" data, numbers by themselves mean little and can be deceptive. What does a poverty rate say if people don't feel poor; if their wants are few, their neighbors all live the same way, and their quality of life is rich?

- b. Data can also be either from primary sources - those, which rely on data directly from the consumers themselves - or secondary - those which rely on data about the consumers from some other source. In discussing client needs, there are obvious advantages to relying on data, which comes directly from the persons who need or will be using the services. However, this is oftentimes subjective.

There is no way of eliminating bias from persons' responses, no matter who the responders may be. As in the case of objective versus subjective data, no single choice is adequate; it will depend largely on the context. As recommended earlier, AAAs should use a mix of methods when assessing need and should stagger the time periods during which the data is collected. Each method should involve a selection of persons who are drawn from all areas of the PSA and who are representative of its demographic diversity. Seniors who are currently non-participants in your (AAAs) programs as well as other individuals in your community (e.g., local business people, civic leaders) should also be represented.

Minimal in-house documentation for each method used should include a description of the method used and its time frame, an explanation of the data objective sought and the use anticipated, characteristics of the persons surveyed, the methods used to contact them, and the questions asked. The completed questionnaires or survey responses should be maintained; they provide a valuable check on accuracy and can be useful for future investigations.

## 2. Formulating Questions

To avoid the many problems inherent in survey construction, a set of **core questions** has been developed (see Part V). AAAs are strongly encouraged to use these questions in their assessment, however, some may find it necessary to develop some questions of their own. The following guidance is provided to assist AAAs who develop additional questions either to supplement or replace some of the core questions.

Questions can be either fixed choice with a specified number of responses to select from, or open-ended, where responses are recorded as given. The fixed choice method allows for easier tabulation and analysis of results; however, it leaves no room for personal responses, which may be a rich source of information. Generally, open-ended questions are preferable for more investigative issues early in a process to identify the main issues or categories. However, after these have been determined and a systematic needs assessment is underway, it is essential to ask respondents to select from fixed choices. Additional space for comments should always be provided for those who feel overly constrained. Also, an open-ended response format is appropriate for a more in-depth analysis of a specific problem, such as in a focus group.

Developing good questions is a difficult task. Survey questions that are confusing, poorly worded, or do not lend themselves to a simple answer are common and cause problems with analyzing results. Many of those who work in community services are familiar with examples of a term or phrase, which could be very confusing or perhaps even offensive if it were used in another culture.

**Pre-testing** of items is an important way to insure these problems are overcome. Before actual use, give the questions to a sample of persons similar to those who will be taking it. Do they understand it? Are the responses reasonable and adequate? Can it be successfully translated? Can it be tabulated reasonably? Allow sufficient time for revisions as a result of the pre-test before the instrument is finalized and reproduced.

## **B. The Core Questions**

As mentioned previously, a set of core questions was developed with assistance from AAA Planners. These questions are intended to be used as a guide and contain the minimum data set of six (6) factors (age, race, ethnicity, educational background, income level, perceived needs) required in the California Code of Regulations (Title 22, Article 3, §7300). The core questions go beyond the basic requirements because it was felt that they will also assist with a more accurate description of the client population and will result in a better understanding of need.

While it is anticipated that each AAA will incorporate the core questions into their various needs assessment efforts, the Department does not intend them to limit their data collection efforts to these questions alone. Rather it is hoped these questions could serve as the core around which further data collection may be conducted.

Additionally, we have included a set of questions for residents of Long-Term Care facilities to encourage inclusion of that population into the planning process.

AAAs wishing to collaborate with other community agencies in a joint needs assessment are encouraged to include the data points identified by the core questions. At a minimum, the needs assessment should elicit data about the client population, which correspond to that sought by the core questions.

Care was taken when developing the most recent questionnaire to include questions, which would be compatible with the 2000 Census sampling data. For this reason, questions pertaining to social indicator variables - gender, age, marital status, race/ethnicity – are designed to be as consistent as possible with those asked in the 2000 Census questionnaire. It is anticipated that data from this census will become available beginning in FY 2002. (For more information on the 2000 Census, you may access their website at [www.2000.census.gov](http://www.2000.census.gov).) Income questions seek to capture information about persons with incomes beginning with 100% of poverty level. The categories are framed in a way that will allow collection of data about persons whose incomes are equivalent to those on Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

The questions relating to basic problem areas have been developed to enable respondents to identify broad areas in which they may have difficulties. The intent of this section is to enable them to identify problem areas, which may or may not be linked to services in the existing network. It is hoped that responses to these questions will enable the AAAs to establish goals in their area plans relating to appropriate components of the service network, and also to discover areas of unmet need. An open-ended question pertaining to problem areas which are not identified in the core questionnaire has been included to encourage respondents to indicate other areas of need not discussed elsewhere.

Questions about functional impairment are included to collect data pertaining to the nature and severity of functional impairment, and the type and availability of assistance to those indicating a level of impairment. It is hoped that this data will contribute to an understanding of the extent of unmet need among functionally impaired Californians.

Finally, the core questions were conceived for use in a mailed survey but need not be limited to that purpose. The questions can be incorporated into a number of data collection methods. They could be included in surveys distributed to clients or key informants or they could be used as a basis for discussion at hearings or community forums. Further, core questions could be used to survey current participants in AAA services and compare this data with that obtained from other non-participants. Reformatting of this sample questionnaire may be necessary depending upon local application (e.g., larger typeface for ease of reading).

## **PART III – DATA COLLECTION**

### **A. Survey Methods**

1. General (Community) Surveys. The random sample community survey can be accomplished by mail-out, phone, or door-to-door. It is among the most effective strategies for collecting data on unmet needs from the population at large and if done properly can yield the most "objective" information of all survey methods. A random survey can be very expensive. Professional help is usually needed in determining the sample size and pool, and in tabulating and interpreting the results. If not done properly the results can be very misleading. There are many additional pitfalls. Avoiding cultural bias in questions is very difficult. Proper selection and phrasing of questions is critical, as is training of staff for verbal surveys. What is to be done about translation into different languages or using interpreters?

Periodic surveys of persons who do not participate in services provided by your AAA is important. Ideally this involves random sampling, but it need not do so. For non-random community surveys it is important to collect information from a broad selection of people who represent the population at large and who capture accurately the characteristics of the population involved. This must be kept in mind in distributing questionnaires. Respondents should be drawn from throughout the PSA in a manner that is consistent with the area's unique demographic profile. Data collected through surveys of targeted sub-populations should be "weighted" to accurately represent their distribution within the area of concern. (For example, if Hispanics constitute 35% of a community, then their responses to a survey of that community should be about 35% of the total or they should carry about 35% of the "weight.")

A simple yet effective non-random sampling technique is the "snowball sample". A small group of initial respondents is each asked to name 3-5 persons who are most knowledgeable about the issues. These new people are also surveyed and in turn asked to provide more names, thus the sample size grows as it "rolls along." As the pool of names increases, respondents can be selected in a "stratified" or weighted manner to represent the population at large and thereby achieve many of the advantages of a random survey. Further, some of the same persons will be named again and again, thus the community "self-selects" its most knowledgeable persons who can be valuable resources for more in-depth techniques such as focus groups or expert opinion.

2. Consumer/client surveys have the advantage of focusing on individuals who are in need of services. They are inexpensive and easy to administer, but are also subject to considerable limitations. Consumers can tell us nothing about the needs of those who are not aware of, or do not ask for, services.
3. Provider surveys are easy to use. They need not be limited to service providers with whom AAAs have a contract. Any person who regularly makes contact with large numbers of persons in need of some support or service, as an employee or as a volunteer, is a good source of information. Providers are in a position to have a deep awareness of customers' actual needs, but can easily see the world in terms of their own existing services and may have their own professional bias. (What teacher does not see a need for better schools? What nutritionist does not feel there should be more or better meals?)
4. Key informants/experts include anyone who is considered knowledgeable about community needs, from program administrators to academics and elected officials to informal community leaders. Like providers, they may be easy to interview and may respond clearly and with considerable insight. However, like providers, their views are personal opinions subject to their own values and biases. One person may feel that persons need more of a certain service, while another may believe there should be less. Also, how many are aware of the needs of the entire community? Finally, is it more advantageous to ask "experts" about people's needs or to ask the people themselves?

Whichever method is used, be sure to record all relevant data about the responders and use that as a check against bias. For example, a large number of responders from medical related fields may skew the results towards health and medical issues. A survey taken at a nutrition site may show a disproportionate concern for food or hunger.

## **B. Other Subjective Methods - Community Forums**

Community forums are useful in that they contribute to an understanding of the perceptions of selected groups. These forums may range from public hearings to focus groups in which individuals from targeted groups discuss specific issues. Information collected through community surveys and secondary sources should not be expected to stand alone in the assessment of need.

1. Focus groups are an increasingly popular assessment tool. Their primary value lies in providing in-depth information on specific areas which is shaped by a process of group discussion and hopefully consensus. This kind of information is highly subjective and the value of focus groups is limited by a number of technical considerations such as selection of participants, identification of questions, and skill of the group leader.
2. Public hearings, strongly rooted in the concept of "town hall" democracy where one can speak for all to hear, are required by law for some occasions. They have the advantage of providing an official public forum; typically testimony is recorded and decision-makers are often in attendance. The dynamics of public testimony lend themselves well to a presentation of testimony on topics which

have previously been prepared and disseminated. Of course the data is limited to that from individuals who are willing and able to attend and testify. This method does little to ascertain "hidden" community needs or those which do not have advocates.

It is particularly important to develop and maintain in-house documentation of the characteristics of forum participants and the details, which pertain to the implementation of community forums. Whenever possible participants should be requested to respond to questions contained in the core questionnaire to establish their particular characteristics. The locations, dates, times, and numbers of participants should be clearly stated, and discussion highlights formulated cogently and related to needs assessment objectives. Information gained should contribute to a deeper understanding or confirmation of data collected through other methods. Documentation can enhance the value of the data collected through this method in the overall needs assessment process.

### **C. Objective Data**

1. Demographic data is the most "objective" of all sources and should be included in any complete needs assessment. The U.S. Census is a valuable source of data about characteristics which can gauge the vulnerability of the population and may indicate service needs (see reference to Census on Page 9). Census data can be obtained for county levels or can be broken down into county subdivisions, even census tract or block levels which can be very useful in the identification and location of groups to be targeted. Among factors to be considered are: age, gender, ethnicity, marital or living status, education, perceived need, income/poverty, disability, isolation, source of income, etc. Further, comparison of indicators from the core questions with similar indicators from the broader census will assist AAAs to assess the reliability of the data collected and to extrapolate findings to a larger area.

The California Department of Finance does annual estimates of population for all cities and counties in the state, and projects population for counties for years far in advance. This data is much more limited than census data; it consists only of gender, age, and race/ethnicity. Current estimates of the population over 59, broken down by race/ethnicity, for each county and PSA in the State are distributed to AAAs each year.

Investigate use of local sources of data. Almost all regional planning agencies (councils of governments or economic development districts) and county planning departments are involved in population estimates or projections, as are many larger cities. In addition, local advocacy groups and service agencies sometimes make estimates of specific population groups. However, caution should be exercised in using local estimates for OAA planning purposes unless they are clearly documented.

2. Information and Assistance reporting data has many advantages. It is usually readily available, it is in aggregate form which boosts objectivity, its focus is on people in need, and it tends to be recorded in categories which are clear to the assessment. However it does not capture any information from the community which is not aware of the service or is unlikely to call, or about the needs which do not fit well into the existing "boxes". (see Part IV, "Best Practices")

3. Service utilization data may be of little value if it stands alone, but can be a valuable complement to other tools.

## **PART IV - BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are a limited selection of "best practices." Doubtless there are other methods which some AAAs are familiar with or have used in their areas.

### **A. Mailed Surveys**

Mailed surveys offer a number of advantages to the researcher, among them more uniform inquiry and the ability to tap larger and more representative samples. However there may be disadvantages as well. Differences between respondents and non-respondents may bias the sample. Similarly, non-writers and non-readers may be unable or reluctant to respond.

Because of these disadvantages, it is recommended that AAAs make every effort to encourage maximum response of survey recipients. Although response rates to mailed questionnaires are known to be low, hovering around 50% and below, researchers have found that response rates of 70% and above can be achieved. Methods undertaken to promote higher rates of response must be considered within the context of available resources. These methods include:

- preparation of cover letters which emphasize the social usefulness of the study and the importance to its success of the responder's participation.
- personalizing of survey documents such as salutations which use the participant's name, individually signed support letters, and use of first-class mailings and better stationery.
- coordination of follow-up by means of postcard in the first week, replacement questionnaires with letters to non-respondents in the third week, and replacement questionnaires sent by certified mail with letters to non-respondents after seven weeks. Telephone follow-up may also be used effectively.

Another area of concern pertains to using mailed surveys with diverse populations. AAAs should work with their Advisory Councils, trained community workers, or specially formed advisory groups to adapt the language of questions and support documents to encourage the response of targeted populations. This effort could be part of a planned program of outreach to involve community leaders, targeted groups, and their providers not only in promoting involvement in the process but also in evaluating and utilizing the resulting data as participants in the overall planning process.

### **B. Survey Methods**

A simple yet effective survey technique is to administer the same survey to a wide variety of different respondents - experts, providers, community leaders, non-

participants, and many consumers from targeted groups. The questionnaires must be recorded and tabulated according to type of respondent. The responses can then be compared or contrasted according to the respondents.

For example, do consumers of a service feel the same as providers? Do Hispanics feel the same as Caucasians or Asians? Do north-county urban residents respond in a similar way to the rural south county? Do frail elderly see community needs like the vigorous "newly old"? How do the answers of males compare with those of females? (Statistical tests can be conducted to assess the significance of any differences as well as correlation between certain items.)

If the responses are the same across groups, this will lend important support to the process itself as well as strengthening the importance of the results. If there are differences, are they due to errors in survey techniques or do they reflect actual differences among the population? If the latter is true, this becomes especially fertile ground for further investigation. For example, if people in a certain locale are unaware of a needed service, this could indicate a need for targeted outreach in that area. If a particular ethnic group does not make use of a service in their neighborhood, could there be insensitivity on the part of the provider? Do higher-income persons see less need for legal services than poorer ones, or do their legal service needs differ?

This kind of survey method has the advantages of being inexpensive and easy to administer. It can be as broad-based as the best random sample while allowing targeting of specific groups, and it can offer stronger verification of the survey instrument and techniques as well as greater reliance on the results. Whether the responses are the same or not, the cross-tabulating will provide much useful information for an assessment of community needs.

### **C. Utilization of Data from Information and Assistance (I & A) System**

There are a number of advantages in utilizing data from Information and Assistance (I & A) programs as one of the sources of needs assessment data, while keeping in mind its limitations. In fact many of the AAAs in California already do so to a certain extent.

One example of utilizing I & A data would be to log every call which is received by an AAA's I & A unit and record the service requested. The responses would be tabulated on a sheet to correspond to the service categories kept by the AAA. This information would allow an AAA to see which categories of service are receiving the most calls. Follow-up could then be made whenever possible. Every call for which no referral could be made or for which there was not a satisfactory referral/outcome would be tabulated as an "unmet need".

Information on specific "unmet needs" would then be turned over to program staff as it accumulates and to the administration and planning staff every three months. This provides them with aggregate data specifically on unmet needs in terms of existing categories of services which becomes an important component of their ongoing needs assessment and can help plot changing needs in your AAA.

In addition, the quarterly data on unmet needs can also be distributed to other service agencies and providers. This not only encourages broader participation in the Needs Assessment process; it can also facilitate discussions and cooperative efforts with other agencies to address or resolve the areas of unmet needs.